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**“A Difficult Symbol for Women”: The Garden Book and the Garden as Retreat  
in the Works of Rosamund Marriott Watson**

**Rachel O’Connell**

**Abstract:** This essay considers how the Aesthete and poet, Rosamund Marriott Watson, explores the idea of the garden as retreat – a treacherously doubled symbol for women, both liberating and confining. In Marriott Watson’s 1891 poetry collection *A Summer Night*, the garden retreat channels the transgressive energies of the 1890s, sheltering but continuous with the city, fostering the creative, sexually emancipated New Woman. By contrast, in her later garden book *The Heart of a Garden* (1906), Marriott Watson draws on the idea of the garden as retreat in order to present a valorization of insularity and withdrawal into domesticity. This essay reads this change in garden ethos in relation to Marriott Watson’s own career and also in terms of the conventions of the garden book (a little known genre that was popular at the turn of the nineteenth century). While the garden book has been read as feminist by recent critics, the example of *The Heart of a Garden* reveals that, like the garden, the garden book carries double and ambivalent meanings. The essay closes by exploring the ways in which we can read Marriott Watson’s garden writing, simultaneously, as a set of reflections on life in the suburbs, another site that conceived, within the Victorian imagination, as a space of retreat.

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## **“A Difficult Symbol for Women”: The Garden Book and the Garden as Retreat in the Works of Rosamund Marriott Watson**

The image of the garden as paradise has always been strong in Christian iconography. The word “paradise” comes from Persian where it meant an enclosed garden. It is, perhaps, a difficult symbol for women.

Sue Bennett, *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens*

The idea of the garden as a retreat (a haven, a shelter from the storm) is rooted in ancient traditions. It derives from the Medieval concept of the *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden, a space associated with female virginity and inspired by the description of the beloved in *Song of Solomon*: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; / A spring shut up, a fountain sealed” (Bennett 12, Brown 50). This strand of associations conceives of the garden as a realm of privacy, self-sufficiency, and tranquility: a secret garden, as Brown puts it, “a hidden place of enchantment and peace ... of refuge, of sanctuary and of looking inwards for hidden treasures” (Brown, 50). The idea of the garden as retreat also references the Horatian model of country retirement, a classical trope that is explored in eighteenth century retirement poetry by such writers as Abraham Cowley, Alexander Pope, and William Cowper (Bending 45). This implicitly masculine tradition extols the values of simplicity, moderation, and seclusion and presents retirement as an antidote for public and political life; “the idea of quiet retirement is presented as the only sensible response to the frivolity and false values of modern urban or courtly life” (Bending 45).

Both of these traditions carry problematic gendered implications about women’s sexuality and about the relation between gender and public life. Thus

Bennett points out, in my opening quote, that the paradise of the enclosed garden can be “a difficult symbol for women.” In this essay I explore how the under-studied Aesthete and poet, Rosamund Marriott Watson, engages with this difficult symbol, so equivocal and yet so compelling for generations of women writers and gardeners. Marriott Watson, I suggest, explores the idea of the garden as retreat throughout her work, but her conception of the garden changes over the course of her career. In Marriott Watson’s 1891 poetry collection *A Summer Night*, the garden channels the transgressive energies of the 1890s. Marriott Watson conceives of it as a porous retreat, sheltered from but continuous with the city; in this inbetween space the creativity and sexuality of the New Woman are nurtured. By contrast, in her later “garden book” (see more on this genre below), *The Heart of a Garden* (1906), the garden has closed its gates. Marriott Watson extols, in this later text, the virtues of a withdrawn and private domestic existence that, compared to the milieu of her early 1890s poetry, is traditional and confined.

The change in what we might call the “garden ethos” in Marriott Watson’s work parallels two other important changes in her career. First, there was a switch in gardens. In *A Summer Night* and *The Heart of a Garden* she was, literally, writing about different gardens: *A Summer Night* explores her garden in St John’s Wood (1888-1895), while *The Heart of a Garden* discusses her later garden in Turnham Green. As Linda Hughes’ indispensable critical biography of Marriott Watson, *Graham R.*, reveals, Marriott Watson’s move from St John’s Wood to Turnham Green was driven by changing life circumstances that had profound implications for her, both as a woman and as a writer. One aim of this essay is to draw on Hughes’ foundational research on Marriott Watson’s life and works to present a biographical

reading that shows how Marriott Watson's writing of the garden allows her to reflect upon her gendered experiences.

At the same time, I present an argument about genre. Marriott Watson's radical garden ethos is expressed in her poetry of the 1890s, while her less progressive account of the garden is presented in the now little-known (predominantly) prose genre of the "garden book." This genre, which emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century, has been read by critics as a feminist form that celebrates women's empowerment as gardeners. I suggest, however, that the garden book has a double-edged quality. While the garden book does bear witness to women's greater access to gardening, it is also complicit with hierarchies of wealth and status, thus evoking a classed and exclusive form of empowerment. The garden book also valorises domestic life, thus proposing a kind of retreat that can confine women. Marriott Watson's own ambivalent garden book reveals this very doubleness, for *The Heart of a Garden* praises domestic withdrawal but at the same time, as I reveal, carries undertones of grief and the desire for escape. I conclude by suggesting that we might read Marriott Watson's double-edged account of the garden as, simultaneously, an ambivalent exploration of life in the suburbs, another space that was associated, in the Victorian imaginary, with a rubric of retreat.

### ***A Summer Night: The Garden of Sexuality and Creativity***

Recent critical work on Marriott Watson reveals that she was one of the most daring figures of turn of the century Aestheticism. She was both an *avant garde* poet and a woman that asserted her sexual freedom, with two divorces and three major relationships in her lifetime; she lived unmarried with her final partner. Linda Hughes, in her important literary and biographical account, shows how in the 1890s

Marriott Watson, under the pen name of “Graham R.,” embraced the radicalism of London’s Aesthetic scene (63-213). Meanwhile Ana Parejo Vadillo, in her discussion of Marriott Watson’s 1891 poetry collection *A Summer Night*, draws on ideas of urban mobility and velocity to present Marriott Watson as a “fast” woman, a bohemian figure that typified the sexual and creative adventurousness of the fin de siècle. In this first section of my essay I propose that, in *A Summer Night*, Marriott Watson relies on the figure of the garden to articulate her ethos of aesthetic and erotic radicalism. Ultimately, the garden that Marriott Watson repeatedly depicts in *A Summer Night* constitutes the physical and literary space in which Marriott Watson becomes Vadillo’s “fast” Aesthete, Hughes’ “Graham R.” In order to generate her challenging and venturesome vision, Marriott Watson both draws upon and modifies the idea of the garden as retreat, imagining the garden as an inbetween space that offers both sanctuary and adventure, a porous retreat that fosters the emergence of the sexually emancipated woman writer.

Vadillo, who reveals how significant place was for Marriott Watson overall, argues that the galvanizing place for Marriott Watson in *A Summer Night* is the London neighbourhood of St John’s Wood, where Marriott Watson lived with her second husband, the Aesthete and painter Arthur Tomson, from 1888-1895. St John’s Wood was at that time a suburban London neighbourhood where artists, writers, political radicals, and prostitutes shared space in an exhilarating mix. Vadillo presents Marriott Watson as the bard of St John’s Wood, producing poetic works that bore witness to that neighbourhood’s transgressive social milieu. I build upon Vadillo’s account by arguing that, for Marriott Watson, not only St John’s Wood but also, specifically, the garden of her home in St John’s Wood, offered a motif or even muse. The St John’s Wood garden is integral to the poetic project of *A Summer Night*. The

frontispiece of this volume, a painting by Arthur Tomson, depicts Marriott Watson sitting in this very garden (see Appendix 1). The garden features prominently in the opening salvo of *A Summer Night*, a sequence of eight poems – five garden poems interspersed with three cityscape poems – that declares the book’s agenda and allegiances.<sup>1</sup> In this opening sequence, on which I will focus my discussion, Marriott Watson presents her daring poetic voice as a New Woman and Aesthete; simultaneously, she reflects upon the garden’s capacity to foster female creativity and sexuality.

The opening sequence presents the garden as a porous, semi-urban space. In the title poem “A Summer Night,” the speaker declares:

Hush!—from the distant street  
Again—again—  
Life’s magic swells and falls,  
Despairing—light—  
Beyond my garden walls  
This summer night.

Already, we encounter a speaker in her garden. While seeming to dwell on the security and detachment of the garden, which is “distant” and walled in from the life of the street, Marriott Watson here declares the garden a space that is open to the outside world—aurally attuned to the noise of street life. This same motif of aural porousness reappears in the fourth poem, “Worship,” in which the speaker listens to worshippers in a nearby church singing, and in the eighth poem, “Aubade,” in which the speaker listens to the footsteps of passers-by in the street. In the seventh poem, “Transformation,” the speaker passes through the streets with a bunch of flowers in her hand, as though the stuff of the garden, likewise, may pass through the urban

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<sup>1</sup> These poems can be found on pages 107-116 of *The Poems of Rosamund Marriott Watson*; hereafter, page references will not be given for quotations from these poems, but the titles of the poems from which I take quotations will be identified.



environment. Marriott Watson thus presents the garden as a modern, porous space, intertwined with the momentum of the city. By connecting the garden with the world outside it, Marriott Watson refuses to approximate a pastoral tradition in her garden representation. This choice resonates with her broader commitment to authenticity in *A Summer Night*. The first stanza of “Of the Earth, Earthy,” the fifth poem in the opening sequence, declares:

Never for us those dreams aforetime shown  
Of white-winged angels on a shining stair,  
Or seas of sapphire round a jasper throne:  
Give us the spangled dusk, the turbid street;  
The dun, dim pavement trod by myriad feet,  
Stained with the yellow lamplight here and there;  
The chill blue skies beyond the spires of stone.

Here Marriott Watson rejects the vision of heaven, and with it, the world of “dreams,” the fantasy of a perfect or undefiled place. She insists instead on the “dun, dim” reality of a contaminated (“stained”) but manifest world.

Building on this exhilarating representation of the garden, Marriott Watson draws on but modifies the idea of the *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden to present an unapologetically sensual female speaker whose sexuality is aligned with her creativity. In “Aubade” the speaker waits in the garden for a lover. An aubade is a poem about lovers separating at dawn; Marriott Watson’s “Aubade,” however, departs from this convention, for the lover never even arrives. By focusing instead on the moment of waiting, Marriott Watson reveals the female speaker’s imaginative and sexual experience when alone. Luxuriantly observant, the speaker waits all night for her lover, but she expresses no grief at his absence. As she waits, she witnesses the garden pass through night into day: “Night lingers dusky and dim in the pear-tree boughs, / Hangs in the hollows of leaves, though the thrushes rouse, / And the glimmering lawn grows grey.” She transforms this experience into a vision of the

remaking of the world: “‘Tis a world made new— / A lost world risen again.” She declares that the garden belongs to her lover, that it is his “demesne.” And yet the vision of the “world made new” that lies at the heart of the poem is the product of the speaker’s rich consciousness.

The infinite possibilities of her sensuous subjectivity are often conjured, in this opening sequence, through images of darkness. Darkness is imbued with a sense of possibility, like the mysterious voice that calls to the speaker out of the darkness in “A Summer Night”:

Where do you call me, where?  
O voice that cries!  
O murky evening air,  
What Paradise,  
Unsought, unfound, unknown,  
Inviteth me,  
With faint night-odours blown?  
With murmerous plea?

It is the garden that shelters these generative spaces of darkness, for the leaves of the trees in the garden proffer a sheltered space where darkness can linger. For instance, the speaker in “Aubade” declares that “Night lingers dusky and dim in the pear-tree boughs, / Hangs in the hollows of leaves.” But throughout these poems Marriott Watson returns repeatedly to the image of exposure and illumination, as in the first poem of the collection: “The linden leaves are wet, / The gas-lights flare— / Deep yellow jewels set / In dusky air.” Likewise, “In a London Garden” opens with an address to “hanging linden leaves the lamp shines through,” while “Aubade” refers to the “linden screen.” This image of the garden’s generative spots of dimness partly shaded by the linden leaves but partly illuminated by the gaslights of the street suggests two realms of experience and endeavor: on the one hand, the street, which signifies a dynamic, public world, and on the other, the deeply buried splendors that constitute

the subjectivity of the sexually emancipated woman poet. The repeated image of the illuminated linden leaves encapsulates the way in which these two phenomena intertwine and foster one another.

The account of the garden presented in *A Summer Night* is perhaps most succinctly characterized by the frontispiece (see Appendix 1), the painting by Marriott Watson's husband, Arthur Tomson. In this portrait of Marriott Watson sitting in her garden her face is turned away from the onlooker, towards the garden wall. This initially seems a strange choice but, as Vadillo points out,

by focusing on the garden wall, Arthur Tomson ... forces the reader to look at the wall *and* what is above the wall. It then becomes clear that Tomson has painted the houses and roofs of the neighboring street. Indeed the wall is not that high, and a closer look at the picture reveals that Graham R. Tomson [Marriott Watson] is *looking up* over the wall. Following the direction of her eye, the viewer sees the city (144).

Vadillo proposes that the illustration constitutes “a kind of announcement, one which visually tells the readers to go beyond the garden wall and see the life of the city” (144). I would suggest, in addition, that the image insists on the mutual dependence of the two spheres that meet in the consciousness of the woman centrally depicted in the image. Both garden and street—both private and public life, both sanctuary and adventure—are accessible to the woman in the image, who is able to explore the world, but from the position of safety and strength provided by the garden with which she identifies, her own space.

### ***The Heart of a Garden I: The Garden of Retirement***

Marriott Watson continued to write poetry about the garden throughout her career. However, during the latter part of her career, as Hughes has detailed, Marriott Watson also wrote prose gardening columns for the *New Liberal Review* and the

*Daily Mail* (from 1901-2, and again in 1905). She brought these columns together to form *The Heart of a Garden* (1906), a work that falls within the generic category of the “garden book.” I propose that Marriott Watson’s move to the genre of the garden book generated a new garden ethos that is different from, but equally as powerful as, that manifested in *A Summer Night*. In *The Heart of a Garden* Marriott Watson offers, not the “fast” garden of the 1890s poetry, but rather, the garden as “fastness”—a fortress, a refuge. In *The Heart of a Garden*, that is, we encounter a different version of the idea of the garden as a retreat. This volume explores a fantasy of enclosing oneself within an all-encompassing domesticity, a self-sufficient space of withdrawal that eschews challenge, difference, and change.

We can attribute this change in garden ethos, at least in part, to the conventions of the particular genre in which Marriott Watson was writing, that of the garden book. Although now little known, the garden book was popular at the turn of the century, when it first emerged.<sup>2</sup> It developed from its precursor, the women’s gardening advice text of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Turn of the century garden books do not, like earlier gardening advice texts, offer systematic information on gardening; indeed, they often dispense with instruction altogether. Instead, they evoke the subjectivity of the gardener-speaker, telling stories of the speaker’s gardening schemes, desires, and woes and exploring the speaker’s experiences of having a garden. This content in part bore witness to, indeed celebrated, the emergence of

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<sup>2</sup> Bilston informs us that other garden books include Eleanor Vere Boyle’s *Days and Hours in a Garden* (1884), Alfred Austin’s *The Garden That I Love* (1894), Alice Dew-Smith’s *Confidences of an Amateur Gardener* (1897), Elizabeth Von Arnim’s *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), and Maud Maryon’s *How the Garden Grew* (1900). Austin and Von Arnim’s books were especially influential. See Bilston and Hapgood for detailed accounts of the garden book, to which Hapgood refers as the “garden romance.”

<sup>3</sup> Bilston lists, as examples of the gardening advice text, J. B. Whiting’s *Manual of Flower Gardening for Ladies* (1849), Louisa Johnson’s *Every Lady Her Own Flower Gardener* (1839), and the relatively well-known publications of Jane Loudon, such as *The Ladies’ Companion to the Flower Garden* (1841) and *Practical Instructions in Gardening for Ladies* (1841).

domestic suburban gardens, which made gardening accessible to a wider public, including women. Formally, the garden book is a magpie genre deriving from several sources, including the diary, the autobiography, the novel, the familiar essay, the gardening instruction text, and newspaper gardening columns. *The Heart of a Garden* is, formally, fairly typical of this genre, presenting a set of essays that describe the garden over the course of a year, from winter through to winter. It has a lightly sketched cast of characters and features numerous lyrical descriptions of the garden, heavily influenced by Aestheticism, as well as poems interspersed throughout.

Both Bilston and Hapgood interpret the garden book as a feminist genre. This derives from the fact that the rise in women's gardening throughout the nineteenth century is understood as an empowering development for women. Judith Page and Elise Smith, for example, argue that the garden was for Victorian women a "zone for experimentation, a place to flex their physical and mental muscles, thus prompting greater freedom and experimentation in their lives" (7). They suggest that "the garden, while tied spatially and rhetorically to the home at its center ... provided women with a new space for active engagement with the world – a space in which to move more boldly and see more clearly" (11). Garden books are understood as texts that bear witness to this liberating development. Thus Bilston points out that the garden is "typically celebrated in later Victorian texts as the author's own space, a place the woman gardener can plot for herself" (9). In a similar vein, Hapgood argues that garden books are "stories of female empowerment and progress" (93) and that they "transgressed the privacy of the gardens that they described to make a dream of women's empowerment shareable with suburban women readers" (111).

While I acknowledge this aspect, I would also emphasise that the garden book celebrates the joys of domesticity within the home and garden. In celebrating these

matters, the garden book cannot disentangle itself entirely from a long history of associations that connect the garden and domesticity with female effacement and confinement. As Bending has shown in his excellent study of women and gardens, the Horatian model of retirement is implicitly masculine. Retirement is the reward for a public or political life. Meanwhile, “female retirement is, if anything, so normalized as the domestic that it excites little remark”; thus Bending helpfully reminds us that, “it is important to register that neat and apparently unexceptionable elision of retreat, domesticity, and femininity, which – precisely because it denies women a place in the public world of action – effectively excludes women also from the high status world of retirement after public endeavor” (60). Bennett, like Bending, notes that “the image of the woman in the secluded garden is redolent of the restricted life which many women led, set apart from the worlds of government, the law, and commerce” (12). Moreover, the garden book brings a newer set of problems to bear, for it is an aspirational, taste-making genre that celebrates home and garden ownership, particularly in the context of the rise of the suburbs, which were considered to be middle class spaces. Thus, to the extent that the garden book celebrates women’s empowerment as gardeners, that empowerment is intertwined with class status and property ownership. All of these features, for me, complicate the garden book’s claim to feminism, and Marriott Watson’s garden book symptomatizes many of these problems, thus exemplifying the double-edged aspect of the garden book.

The change that occurred in Marriott Watson’s presentation of the garden from *A Summer Night* to *The Heart of a Garden* is best encapsulated by again considering frontispieces. The frontispiece of *The Heart of a Garden* (Appendix 2) presents an image whose content, at first, seems strikingly similar to that of the frontispiece of *A Summer Night* (Appendix 1). The frontispiece to *The Heart of a*

*Garden* shows a woman, her back turned to the onlooker, looking out over a garden wall. However, whereas in the frontispiece to *A Summer Night* the woman gazed out at the buildings of the city, in this later illustration the woman looks out on the landscape of a deserted beach. The empty landscape at which the woman gazes reorients the garden, which no longer appears as a space integrated with bustling city life. Rather, the woman in this later illustration is oriented towards stillness, emptiness, and silence, and the garden becomes a secluded and isolated space.

The garden here, then, is no longer a porous retreat connected to the life that is lived outside it; rather, it is an enclosed paradise, shut off from the outside world. *The Heart of a Garden* is laced with references to perfect, imaginary worlds that are separated from reality: the very first page references Eldorado, the “oasis,” and the “haven.” Throughout the book, Marriott Watson draws comparisons between her garden and “Paradise,” such mythical Edens as “the garden of the Hesperides and the pleasaunce of Armida;” she declares that “here, in this Arcady in little of the walled garden, there is scant room for tragedy; it is a microcosm of diminutive disasters and many amenities” (159). Thus rather than engaging with the “dun, dim” and “stained” reality of the world, as in “Of the Earth, Earthy” (discussed above), *The Heart of a Garden* turns to “dreams” of a different world, a sort of miniature world where nothing bad or momentous can happen. Indeed, in her description of the frost in her garden, is as though she speaks from within the bejeweled heavenly city of sapphire and jasper that she rejected in “Of the Earth, Earthy” (discussed above):

The hoar frost and the snow have been weaving their white magic over the garden, a wonder that never stales ... When you awake in the clear shining of the sun to discovery of the night’s enchanted work, wrought with such swiftness, in such silence, it is as though you walked in a new world, in some strange kingdom of faery with trees of silver and flowers and fruits of diamond and pearl. (8-9).

Her description of the retreat of the blackbird offers an apt analogy for her own situation here: “Sometimes a little while before sunset the blackbird flings us forth scanty alms of song from his fastness in the thick leafage. Faintly they sound, those strange, rich cadences, and with a note of such remoteness as though the gates of ivory stood open for the moment to let the lost strain through” (79). Marriott Watson, too, offers her beautiful song from within a fantastical hidden fastness guarded by frosty ivory gates; these gates are far less porous than her earlier “linden screen.”

Meanwhile, like the beloved in *Song of Solomon*, a figure that associated with the *hortus conclusus*, Marriott Watson’s speaker in this text is a “garden enclosed ... A spring shut up, a fountain sealed.” While *A Summer Night* carries its allegiance to summer on its sleeve, or rather in its title, in *The Heart of a Garden* Marriott Watson chooses to start and end her account of the gardening year in winter. While summer implies license, expansion, and the burgeoning of desire, the voice of Marriott Watson’s “barren winter solstice” (157) bespeaks maturity. This is the voice, as Hughes says, of the “chatelaine” (273), the mistress of a house or castle, a figure of feminine maturity. This speaker is associated, in Marriott Watson’s text, with twilight, as explored in the poem “The Waning Year,” which heads the second last chapter:

Vestured and veiled with twilight,  
Lulled in the winter’s ease,  
Dim, and happy, and silent,  
My garden dreams by its trees. (143)

This nun-like, sealed, passive state (“Folded and fenced,” with “no stir,” “no pulse,” “Never a bud to bourgeon,” and “Never a bird to sing”) mirrors the state of mind of the speaker: “It is twilight here in my garden, / And twilight here in my heart.” This is a secluded speaker that has folded in upon herself, relishing a state of settled maturity that is impervious to the incursions of desire or change.



This twilight of settled maturity is conveyed most evocatively in the Autumn section of the book, where the speaker describes her stored apples, packed away “in dull, rich mosaics of amaranth and rose and gold” (110). This passage extolls the substantial virtues—the solid forms and tasteful, autumnal colours—of the fruit crop. These “garnered treasures of the orchard” sit “side by side, upon the long and narrow shelves that rise, tier above ghostly tier, through the scented twilight of the fruit gallery,” “embalmed in this brown gloaming” (108). The fruit is “impregnated through and through with the very spirit and soul of summer,” which it stores up for winter. Elsewhere, Marriott Watson’s book endorses a similar ethos of hoarding and storing: she writes, “As I go from one parterre to another, casting complacent glances from border to border, from plot to plot, my heart leaps up with something, I imagine, of the miser’s sense of power, of hoarded happiness” (144-5). Marriott Watson here presents an idealization of wealth and private plenty.

This idealization is underwritten by the book’s aspirational features. Some portions of the text seem designed to elicit the reader’s envy or aspirational fantasies. In a characteristic passage, Marriott Watson’s speaker declares that,

the pergola is clothed afresh with orange and amber glories of the William Allen Richardson, and snowed upon from climbing garlands of Aimee Vibert; while the high south wall of grey and ancient stone is touched to tenderest beauty by the pale alabaster of the moon-shaped Lamarque and the fine gold of Marechal Niel” (103).

The almost comically rarefied landscape presented here signifies a milieu of leisure and wealth. In addition, *The Heart of a Garden* asserts the pleasure and status of ownership; for instance, Marriott Watson speaks of “my prodigious bed of phloxes,” declaring it to be “the present *pride* of my heart” (126, my emphases). Similarly, the character of Felicia (one of the book’s lightly sketched characters) allows the speaker

to savor the pleasures of patronage. Felicia has no garden of her own—a fate so pathetic, apparently, that the speaker has found Felicia filling the vases in her home with common weeds. The speaker benevolently turns Felicia “adrift, scissors in hand, amid my frail-garlanded isles and islands of the many-hued sweet-pea” (88-89). In passages such as these, I would suggest, Marriott Watson’s garden book fulfills the contradictory conventions of its genre, which simultaneously presents a feminist celebration of women’s gardening, and an idealisation of domesticity, privacy, and wealth, where the garden becomes a socially conservative utopia that encloses the subject and excludes the outside world.

### ***The Heart of a Garden II: The Garden of Punishment and Shame***

In his account of women and gardens, Bending hauntingly points out that in the eighteenth century retreat was often a “site of female shame” (108). He argues that “models of disgrace and punishment are part of the mainstream cultural imagination of retirement,” for instance in eighteenth century novels where country retirement was the fate of “fallen” women. Thus Bending declares that, “scandal and punishment ... is central to eighteenth-century accounts of women and gardens” (92-3). While Marriott Watson’s garden in *The Heart of a Garden* is suburban rather than rural, it is this idea of retreat as exclusion and punishment, a sign of sexual shame and of “failure in the public world” (94), that I want to emphasize in this section, in which I excavate the strands of ambivalence, loss, and grief that underlie the aspirational discourse of *The Heart of a Garden*.

There is clear biographical evidence that sexual shame and punishment informed Marriott Watson’s engagement with discourses of retreat in the later part of her career. In 1894 Marriott Watson left Arthur Tomson to live with H. B. Marriott

Watson (to whom I will refer hereafter as HB), whom she never married, and with HB she moved to Heathfield Cottage in Turnham Green. As Linda Hughes has shown (249-51), Marriott Watson's move to HB and to Turnham Green diminished her access to her community and professional network not only geographically but also socially and professionally, for some saw her as a "ruined" woman and cut her off. Moreover, she lost her established pen name, Graham R. Tomson (which used Arthur Tomson's name), and so had, in a sense, to start her career over again, and from a position of disadvantage, seeking to head off potential scandal. She was forced to do more unsigned writing and hackwork and her poetry and mental and physical health suffered as a result. Moreover, HB had a more forceful and conventionally masculine personality than Arthur Tomson and less advanced ideas about women's roles.

Hughes describes this part of Marriott Watson's life as a period of "retreat" (249). Paradoxically, as a "ruined" woman Marriott Watson lived a more domesticated and confined existence than that which she had known as a married woman. Hughes identifies Marriott Watson's posthumously published, late poem "Lux et Umbra" as a work that captures the position in which Marriott Watson found herself in her later years. In "Lux et Umbra" the speaker makes the following declaration:

I stay here in the shadow while you stand forth in the sun  
 The clear, enveloping shadow where all desires are as one  
 . . . . .

I in my cloistered garden and you on the highwayside. (282)

While Marriott Watson's earlier garden poems used the figure of the garden to emphasize the female speaker's agency, this poem does the opposite. Here, withdrawal into the garden represents the speaker's withdrawal into a version of femininity that is confined to privacy and obscurity. Thus it seems that important

losses accompanied Marriott Watson's transformation from venturesome Aesthete to remote "chatelaine," her move from her "fast" St John's Wood garden to her Turnham Green "fastness."

These losses are manifested in *The Heart of a Garden* by the book's references to 1890s Aestheticism. Rapturous descriptions of flowers are a fixture of garden books, but Marriott Watson's descriptions have distinctively Aesthetic qualities. Her flower descriptions, for instance, are full of passages like the following, which describes her hollyhocks:

Once more the vision of ancient casements of stained glass swims into ken. Tall, slender spires of jade and chrysoprase, they sway this way and that in the slow evening breeze, set with their many chalices of clouded crystal. Some are coloured like amethysts, and some like roses; others show translucent dyes of apricot and lemon, saffron and topaz and pearl, while not the least enchanting are those that shimmer vaguely, white as the high moon, shot through with dim, faint stains of green, or blush, or palest amber. (84)

In such passages the medieval allusions, references to jewels, nuanced color palette, and rarefied, exquisite register bring to mind the writings of iconic Aesthetes such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Indeed, the book contains several direct references to Walter Pater, for instance a description of nasturtiums burning "with hard, gem-like flames" (125), and Hughes argues that in *The Heart of a Garden* Marriott Watson follows "the model of Paterian consciousness—in which successive moments flicker and glow, then disappear into time's implacable flow" (294). It is as though Marriott Watson were remembering, through the very style of her book, the Aesthetic scene of the 1890s.

This nostalgia is underpinned by a sense of grief that emerges most strikingly, again, in the frontispiece of the book. The poem "Fata Morgana" is inset into the frontispiece. A Fata Morgana is a type of mirage that forms in a band just above the

horizon. The inset poem thus suggests that white band on the horizon depicted in the frontispiece image is a Fata Morgana mirage; it is at this mirage that the woman in the image gazes. The illusion that she looks on is one of spring, joy, and youth:

I dreamed the peach-trees blossomed once again,  
I dreamed the birds were calling in the dew,  
Sun-rays fell round me like a golden rain,  
And all was well with us and life was new.

This vision comes to the speaker in the midst of winter, and in the midst of the world of withdrawn maturity that the winter passages of *The Heart of a Garden* evoke. In a protest against this winter season, the speaker declares, defiantly, “Though boughs are barren now and no birds sing, / I know the joy I never may reclaim.” The turning away of the figure in the image, then, may indicate a reluctance to participate in the world of the garden as presented in this text—a desire to escape instead into a different world. The mirage of a joy she “never may reclaim” may be a vision of the view over a different garden wall—the view onto the street, depicted in the frontispiece of *A Summer Night*. The figure in the image, perhaps, gazes upon the mirage of a garden that fostered a lively, challenging, porous life, rather than the winter fastness in which she now finds herself.

### **Conclusion: A Tale of Two Suburbs**

The conception of the garden as a “fastness” presented in *The Heart of a Garden* evokes the *hortus conclusus* but also, arguably, has a more modern referent: the ideal of suburban living that emerged during the nineteenth century. Hapgood suggests that we can identify a distinctive subset of nineteenth and twentieth century literature that attends to the suburbs. Considering works by writers as diverse as HG Wells, William Morris, Arthur Conan Doyle, and E. M. Forster, Hapgood proposes

that we can read their “suburban fictions” as a “coherent body of work” that presents “an overarching suburban narrative” (5). Hapgood interprets garden books as part of the literature of suburbia, suggesting that the rise of the small garden “during the 1890s and the Edwardian years in the suburbs” effectively generated the garden book (or “garden romance” as Hapgood terms it) as a “new genre” (92). Both of the gardens discussed by Marriott Watson were indeed located in neighbourhoods (St John’s Wood and Turnham Green) that were considered suburbs of London. In concluding this essay, therefore, I read Marriott Watson as one such writer of the suburbs, spaces that were themselves conceived of as zones of retreat. I read Marriott Watson here as a writer whose gendered relationship with retreat, enclosure, and aspiration, produces an ambivalent, shifting, gender-inflected suburban narrative.

Whelan details the particular Victorian imaginary of the suburb. The suburbs were envisaged as middle class neighbourhoods that centred on the nuclear family and were characterized by a middle class ideal of propriety: “privacy, quiet, respectability, and social homogeneity” (24). Overall, they were understood in terms of retreat, specifically retreat from the city, which was seen, in this context, as a zone of pollution and chaos. Thus, one key feature of the suburb was “symbolic distance from the city” (8). It is, Whelan states, “an incontrovertible aspect of suburban-ness that one must feel some sense of separation from urban space. This cannot always be measured in miles or time required to travel between the two” (8). Ultimately, then, the suburbs were conceived of in utopian terms as a haven away from the challenges that were associated with the city, such as poverty, labour, and difference (although Whelan argues that in real life Victorian suburbs were often nothing like this). We might read Marriott Watson’s garden narratives as two very different evocations of the symbolic distance between the suburb and the city – evocations in which this

distance seems to expand and contract, smaller in *A Summer Night* and larger in *The Heart of a Garden*.

Whelan notes that in one iteration, “the suburb was imagined as a place that enabled its inhabitants to walk the narrow line between constant and uncontrolled contact with the urban ‘residuum’ and rural isolation from the sources of capital” (15). In *A Summer Night* Marriott Watson seems to be exploring this concept of the suburb as an inbetween space that avoids “rural isolation” and yet remains connected to the city – the commutable suburb linked with the city by public transport and by social, cultural, and professional connections. The commute itself may be evoked in “Of the Earth, Earthy,” in which Marriott Watson conjures the vision of a “spangled dusk” in which the “dun, dim pavement” is “trodden by myriad feet,” perhaps the feet of those traveling home from work as the day ends. This porous suburb emerges throughout *A Summer Night* as Marriott Watson explores themes of interconnectedness and permeability, generating what Vadillo calls a “geo-ontological poetics” that breaks down the boundaries between various spaces and spheres, including, I suggest, that between the suburb and the city.

The idea of the suburb as a “haven from urban chaos” (Whelan, 9), however, could also harden the separation of the suburb from the city, and in so doing valorize the isolation and privatization of the nuclear family. Quoting F. M. L. Thompson’s *The Rise of Suburbia*, Whelan suggests that the ideal suburban home was the “kind of house, where the family could distance itself from the outside world in its own private fortress behind its own garden fence and privet hedge” (Thompson, qtd. in Whelan 17). This profoundly insular, fortress-like conception of the suburban milieu is perhaps the ideal that is played out within a specific subset of suburban fictions, as identified by Hapgood. This subset, exemplified by the works of Keble Howard, is the

“suburban idyll,” a type of suburban fiction dedicated to “the consolidation of the city-suburb divide” (41). It romanticizes the suburb as a “domestic utopia” (39), presenting “serene and circumscribed worlds” that ward off the city, history, and public life and instead emphasise the suburb’s “moral distance from London” (40), while also entrenching and naturalizing domesticity as a woman’s realm (42). In *The Heart of a Garden*, by presenting her suburban garden as a “fastness,” Marriott Watson seems to produce just such a “suburban idyll,” albeit a deeply ambivalent one.

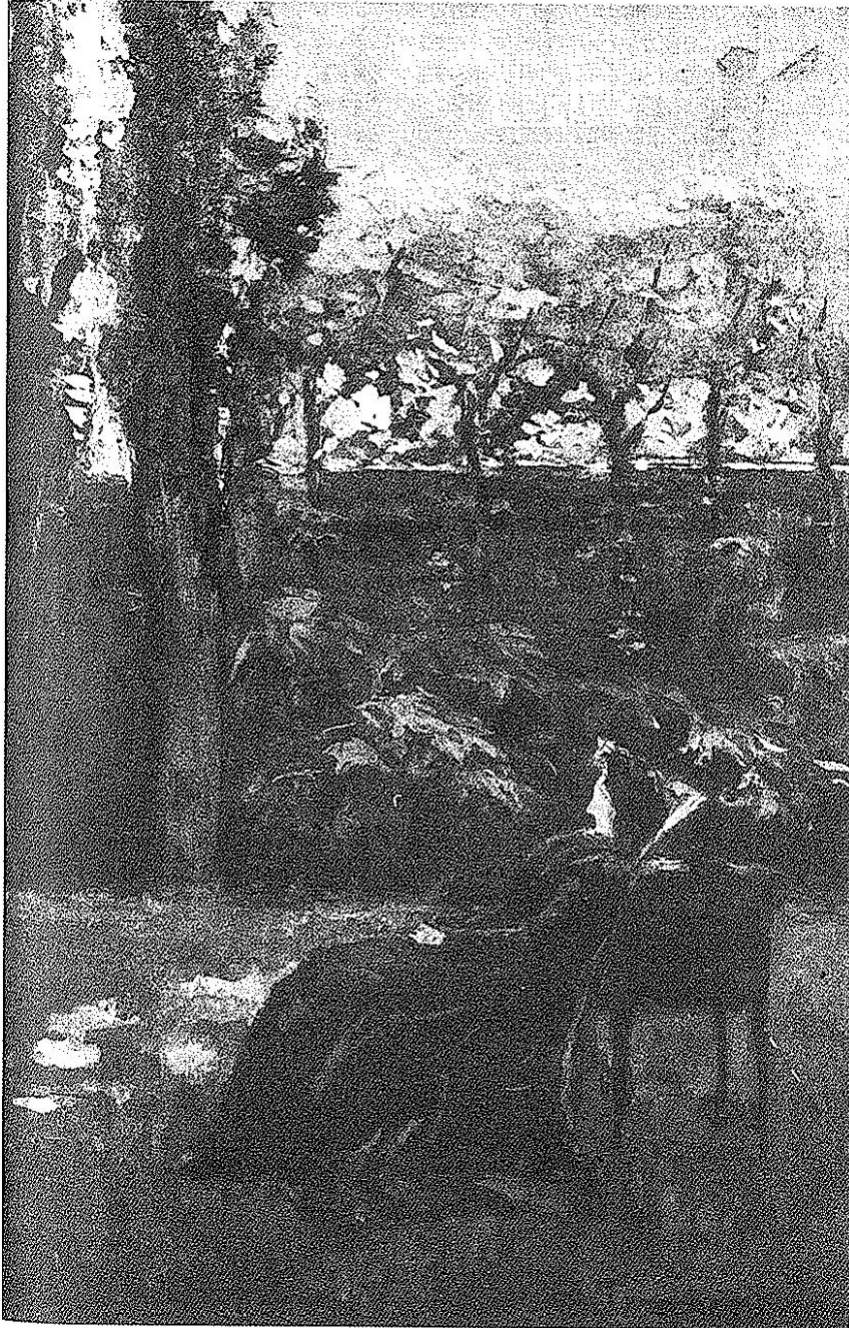
Ultimately, in *A Summer Night* and *The Heart of a Garden*, we find Marriott Watson, a writer to whom place was, as Vadillo argues, so crucial, exploring the complex doubleness of the spaces that women of her class and profession could occupy. Her 1890s poems explore the suburb as a space that could be continuous with the city, offering the woman writer both retreat and connection, while *The Heart of the Garden* presents an insular account of the suburb that ambivalently presents it as both a refuge and a trap. This doubleness of the ideal of the suburb echoes the longstanding, treacherous doubleness of the garden, which embodies compelling ideas that, for women, both entice and confine. This problem of the garden’s doubleness is imported into the genre of garden book, reminding us to celebrate this genre’s feminism cautiously, acknowledging its inalienable ambivalence. Ultimately, in considering Marriott Watson’s garden writings, we discover her gendered gardening double-bind. She struggles to come to terms with the “difficult symbol” of the garden, exploring how to celebrate the powerful vision of paradise that is the enclosed garden, without simultaneously enclosing the female subject.



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Appendix 1: Frontispiece of Rosamund Marriott Watson's *A Summer Night* (reproduced from Ana Parejo Vadillo's *Passengers of Modernity*)



Appendix 2: Frontispiece of Rosamund Marriott Watson's *The Heart of a Garden*

